

Orientation Day

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As a new Form 1 student, I arrived at school on the first day with my pink book bag decorated with little yellow ducks. I was duly dropped off by my father and didn't know where my classroom was. He, however, assumed that I would manage because I had the advantage of knowing other girls from my primary school who would be there. And, somehow, having an older sister who had attended the school was supposed to be another advantage. I do not recall an Orientation Day as it exists now in many educational settings. Perhaps it would have helped me.

Most, if not all, educational institutions organise an Orientation Day for beginning students. Its main purpose is to ease students into their new experience by providing information and a forum for questions. Planning for such an occasion should logically force institutions to examine their policies for clarity, effectiveness, and student centredness. It also creates a mandatory deadline for management to create certain logistical necessities such as timetables, forms, procedures, and the like. Educational institutions need to ensure that both academic and non academic staff are au courant with the information that is shared with incoming students. Quite often, dissonance and inefficiency are created when an information gap exists. This points to the essentiality of planning for Orientation long before the actual date, so that all staff have an input and an understanding of how new students are being "initiated" into the institution.

Apart from the obvious need for information and guidelines, one of the major objectives of an Orientation Day is to engage new students in the socialisation process of schooling or education. All institutions function on the premise that their goal is to satisfy a social need. How they perceive their role in the translation of that need varies. How students respond to the initial socialisation will also vary. In the case of children and adolescents, the occasion also includes the participation of parents, thus creating a two-fold task for primary and secondary school managers. How schools interpret their role, and to what extent this role is guided by a sense of purpose and conviction, will determine whether parents and students are eventually satisfied or disappointed by pronouncements and promises initially made.

Orientation Days are usually saturated with lofty goals that seek to highlight the norms of the institution and the behavioural, attitudinal, and performance expectations of students. At the primary and secondary levels, norms and expectations are also highlighted with respect to parents. An institution's declaration that it "takes two hands to clap" may be inspirational to most, but daunting to some. The challenge arises when one party experiences disappointment either with the "system" or with the "client," due to either party not keeping its side of the bargain.

One of the reasons that initial motivation may simmer into disappointment as the term gets into gear is that either one or all of the parties involved—student, teacher, parent, or even administrator—may face challenges with coping. Therefore, planning for Orientation Day must consider the coping mechanisms that all parties will need as the

academic year progresses. Students and, where applicable, parents or guardians must be introduced to practical mechanisms that could alleviate the normal stress of meeting the requirements and expectations of academic life.

Apart from attention to academic details, Orientation Day involves other baggage often overlooked by planners. The concept of belonging and “fitting in” is a cause of anxiety for the average human being. In the context of schools, there may be some disadvantage and discomfort on the part of parents and students who do not possess the knowledge, experience, competence, and resources that administrators and teachers assume they do. It is a common practice for presenters to use the pronoun “we” to promote the notions of “team,” “family,” and “community.” If one is not careful, though, the pronoun can serve to isolate those who may have some reason to feel that, even at the outset, they do not belong. It is attention to details such as these that contributes to the “first impression” created on Orientation Day.

Event planners are well aware of the importance of first impressions. Detailed planning and calculations contribute to a positive impression. What is even more important, though, is a positive impression that lasts, that is, one that is based not on superficiality, but on substance. For young students and parents, and also for mature students, Orientation Day may be not just a lasting memory but a primary resource.

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